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Member Engagement Section

In the Autumn 16 issue Fiona Creaby reflected on professional tensions raised in recent research by Charlotte Woods and colleagues at the University of Manchester which asked questions about 'how competing education and business values and agendas play out in schools; are they 'perfect partners' or are they 'uneasy bedfellows'? We called for the readership to share their perspectives on the matter. Below, we have a very considered response from Simon Leicester (Finance & Business Director, Hendon School London). Simon articulates the importance of business principles and insights in supporting 'the art of teaching' in education as he argues that ideological connotations should not stand in the way of schools embracing business principles.

"In response to 'From the inside out: what does business really mean in schools?', the Fiona Creaby article from the Autumn 16 edition of The Voice, perhaps educating students can be summarised as the 'art of teaching', supported by some principles of business, since using business approaches to achieve effectiveness and efficiency in delivering better teaching and learning isn't necessarily incompatible with a school's mission, values or annual goals. Taking an allied example, a business consulting firm or training firm that employs business principles and approaches can be transformational to its client base, building tomorrow's leaders, while revealing previously hidden talents or insights in the client organisation. The fact that the consulting or training firm uses business principles and insights, doesn't of itself undermine the core mission of the client organisation.

"The 'art of teaching' is arguably about fostering student achievement, in spite of a variety of constraints (time and money), parent expectations, student learning styles and teaching settings. The art of teaching is arguably underpinned by efficient school processes and well managed infrastructures, whether we choose to label these as business things or not. In addition, where a school can apply business principles to earn supplementary income through after hours lettings, donor fundraising or surplus asset sales and such income can be devoted to enhancing the teaching and learning amongst the students, business approaches would seem justifiable in a school setting.

"The art of teaching arguably has a human resource productivity dimension to it as well. Like any team of people, teaching staff need direction, incentives, coaching, feedback on their performance and guidance in difficult situations. Do these things well and school resource productivity will likely improve. Where schools can view teacher management as fundamentally a human resources management issue, they are arguably turning to business for HR tools, frameworks and techniques, to improve the impact that the teaching staff can make at the school.

"Teaching can also learn from business in a number of its activities. Strategic planning concerning curriculum and competitors is one example. Creating development teams and managing change projects is another. Systems integration for enhanced school information management is a third. The art of prioritisation, delegation, marketing and stakeholder relations management are some others.

"In summary, well-performing schools, whether faith schools, independent schools or state schools appear relatively comfortable embracing at least some business principles, in order to achieve their primary mission. We shouldn't let ideological connotations or semantic definitions stand in the way of progress.

Simon Leicester

FIONA'S RESPONSE

In continuing the discussion, Fiona offers some reflections on Simon's response and raises some further points for consideration:

In responding to the debate around competing values and agendas in schools I raised attention to in the Autumn 16 article (*From the inside, out: what does 'business' really mean in schools*), Simon Leicester has contributed a very thoughtful response. In highlighting that *'[w]e shouldn't let ideological connotations or semantic definitions stand in the way of progress'* he offered some excellent examples from practice of how business principles support and enhance the *'the art of teaching'* regardless of how 'business' is understood. Indeed, for tensions around how business is understood to not *'stand in the way'* of the contribution it can make to the strategic development of schools and outcomes for children, especially in times of reform and change, it is important that practitioners continue to share examples of practice, like Simon has, to illuminate the realities of business management in schools. Indeed, as the original article raised, there is great diversity in how business management is understood across the wider education workforce¹. This places constraints on what practitioners can achieve in their daily realities and the impact business management can have within schools despite the vital role it has been shown to play¹. It is then in sharing perspectives and challenging taken-for-granted assumptions and expectations about what 'business' means that we can create a greater shared understanding that can positively impact on the development of schools. As education in this country is arguably based upon political and economic ideology that reflects the government's beliefs and ideals around improving society, ideology underpins how the expectations of practice are determined as well as how the purpose of practice, like business management, is then interpreted and negotiated in local contexts over time.

¹ Woods, C, Armstrong, P., Bragg, J., and Pearson, D. (2014) Perfect Partners or Uneasy Bedfellows? Competing Understandings of the Place of Business Management within Contemporary Education Partnerships. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership* 41(6):751–766.

Therefore, it is important that practitioners have a greater voice in illuminating the realities of practice to help inform the very ideologies that determine education reform and how this is interpreted into practice in schools.

Overall, the interplay of school strategic development, business management and '*the art of teaching*' is certainly an interesting area of exploration in terms of the tensions and dilemmas this interplay can bring to practice and how these can be overcome, especially in a changing policy context. To continue the discussion, it would be interesting to hear further thoughts and examples from readers on how business principles, such as those Simon described, are understood within their schools, how they are embraced (or perhaps not), and the difference that embracing them (or not embracing them) has made to outcomes for children within their school.

Many thanks to Simon for taking the time to share his thoughts.

Dr Fiona Creaby

Footnote (1) is at the bottom of this page.